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Aevum, aeterna tempora, and *tempus generale* between history and metaphysics.
A note on the Patristic reading of time and duration[1]

1. INTRODUCTION

The medieval vocabulary for the concepts of time and duration covers a number of technical terms, constantly evolving.[2] Some classifications enumerate up to five different durations modes.[3] However, the prevailing opinion, from the beginning of the 13th century, considers three crucial notions: *aeternitas, aevum,* and *tempus*.[4] The concept of *aevum*, whose gene-

[1] The present paper is a partial outcome of the research project *Un tempo senza movimento. Rappresentazioni alto-medievali della durata e del "quando"* conducted at the Department of Civilizations and Forms of Knowledge of the University of Pisa, in the framework of the activities of Excellence Project *I tempi delle strutture. Resilienze, accelerazioni e percezioni del cambiamento (nello spazio euro-mediterraneo)*. I thank prof. Stefano Perfetti for his precious suggestions and the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and many insightful comments.

[2] For a broad overview on this topic see MANSION, A.: *La théorie aristotelicienne du temps chez les péripatéticiens médiévaux*, in: Revue Néoscolastique de Philosophie 36 (1934), 275–307; MAIER, A.: *Scholastische Diskussionen über die Wesensbestimmung der Zeit*, in: Scholastik 26 (1951), 520–556; ID.: *Die Subjektivierung der Zeit in der scholastischen Philosophie*, in: Philosophia Naturalis 1 (1951), 361–398; ID.: *Metaphysische Hintergründe der spätscholastischen Naturphilosophie*. Roma: Storia e Letteratura 1955, 47–137; SUAREZ-NANI, T.: *Tempo ed essere nell'autunno del Medioevo. Il "De tempore" di Nicola di Strasburgo e il dibattito sulla natura ed il senso del tempo agli inizi del XIV secolo*. Berlin: Grüner 1989; PORRO, P: *Forme e modelli di durata nel pensiero medievale. L'*aevum*, il tempo discreto, la categoria "quando"*. Leuven: Leuven University Press 1996; ID.: *Un tempo per le cose. Il problema della durata dell'essere sostanziale nella ricezione scolastica di Aristotele*, in: RUGGIU, L. (a cura di): *Il tempo in questione. Paradigmi della temporalità nel pensiero occidentale*. Milano: Guerini 1997, 143–154; ID.: *Il vocabolario filosofico medievale del tempo e della durata*, in: CAPASSO, R./PICCARI, P. (a cura di): *Il tempo nel Medioevo. Rappresentazioni storiche e concezioni filosofiche*. Roma: Società Italiana di Demodossalogia 2000, 63–102.

[3] See, for example, DIETRICH OF FREIBERG: *De mensuris*, II, 1–48, ed. R. Rehn, in: FLASCH, K./CAVIGIOLI, J./IMBACH, R./MOJSISCH, B./PAGNONI-STURLESE, M./REHN, R./STURLESE, L. (eds.): *Dietrich von Freiberg, Opera omnia III: Schriften zur Naturphilosophie und Metaphysik*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 216–225.

[4] See, for example, ALEXANDER OF HALES: *Summa theologica*, I, pars 1, inq. 1, tr. 2, q. 4, membrum 3, cap. 1, Florence: Quaracchi 1924, 100; ROBERT KILWARDBY: *In II Sent.*, dist. 2, q. 10, ed. G. Leibold. München: Verlag der bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften 1992, 40–41; ALBERT THE GREAT: *Super Dion. de div. nom.*, c. 10, ed. P. Simon. Münster: Aschendorff 1972, 400, 28–33; THOMAS AQUINAS: *Super Sent.*, I, dist. 19, q. 2, art. 1, sol., ed. P. Mandonnet. Parisiis: P. Lethielleux 1929, 467. Cfr. ANZULEWICZ, H.: *Aeternitas-Aevum-Tempus: the concept of time in the system of Albert the Great*, in: PORRO (ed.): *The Medieval concept of time.*

sis and different meanings have thoroughly examined by Pasquale Porro,[5] seems to match with the Eriugenian idea of *tempus generale*[6] or with the late ancient notion of *saeculum*.[7] In any case, regardless of the various lexical choices, the fact that eternal and temporal entities do not constitute the unique substances forming the universe seems to be a shared principle.

The analysis of time- and duration-related vocabulary is indeed a secondary subject of the present paper, as this side of the problem has already been explored in detail.[8] The aim is rather to focus on the speculative reasons underlying the need to establish intermediate measures between eternity and temporality, for some aspects concerning the roots of the problem still deserve to be examined.

2. Describing the stages of salvation history

Medieval authors are often regarded as "accountants" engaged in a careful classification of all substances forming their world (animals, humans, rational souls, angelic creatures, celestial bodies, intelligences, and God) with their relative durations (*tempus, aevum, aeviternitas, tempus generale*, etc.). However, such image, which particularly reflects the way of some 13th-century theologians, provides a partial reading of the problem. The need to assume the existence of duration modes beyond eternity and time is not only a physical or metaphysical issue, but also a historical one, especially considering how it is addressed by the Latin Fathers of the Church. In fact, they employ equivocal notions from the Greek philosophical tradition, such as αἰών or χρόνος, not so much to provide a list of all measureable durations in the present universe, but rather to establish the sequence of the duration modes in salvation history (from the creation to the end times). The adjective "historical" might sound meaningless or contradicttory in this context. Whilst it makes sense for the concept of "time", it cannot be applied to eternal substance, as it is "a-historical" by definition. However, the Christian message is based on a sequence of "historical events" involving God (eternity) and his creatures (temporality) and sometimes these events occur in a particular duration.

The scholastic debate and its reception in early modern philosophy. Leiden: E.J. Brill 2001, 83–130.

[5] Cfr. Porro: *Forme e modelli*, 51–266.

[6] Cfr. John Scotus Eriugena: *Periph.*, I (= CCCM 161, 58,1746–1756). Cfr. Chenu, M.D.: *La théologie au douzième siècle*. Paris: Vrin 1976, 383–384; Porro: *Il vocabolario filosofico*, 71.

[7] Cfr. Augustine: *C. Prisc.*, V, 5 (= CCSL 49, 169,114–133). In this regard see Porro: *Forme e modelli*, 76–79.

[8] Cfr. note 2.

2.1. *Aevum, temporalis aetas, and infinita aeternitas in Tertullian's* Apologeticum

The need to establish new forms of duration to explain all stages of salvation history unequivocally emerges in the chapter 48 of Tertullian's *Apologeticum*:

> "The same divine mind which arranged the universe out of diverse elements, so that all things should consist of rival substances under the reign of unity—void and solid, animate and inanimate, tangible and intangible, light and darkness, life itself and death—this same divine mind also has so distributed the duration of the world and formed it into a whole on the condition of this distribution that this first part, which from the beginning of things we have been inhabiting, passes on toward its end in an age subject to time; but the subsequent one, which we hope for, will be prolonged into an eternity without end. So, when the limit and boundary line which gapes widely in the midst is at hand, so that even the temporal aspect of this world is changed, which is stretched out like a curtain against the disposition of eternity, then shall the entire human race be restored to settle the account for the good or the evil it has merited in this duration of the world, from then on to be requited for a limitless and unending eternity. And so, no longer will there be death or resurrection again and again, but we will be the same as we now are and not someone else afterwards; being really worshippers of God, we will always be with God, clad in the eternity of our own proper substance which we have put on."[9]

The divine mind (*ratio*), as "eternal substance",[10] creates the universe subject to a general duration (*aevum*) including both "the time of the present world" (*temporalis aetas*) and "the eternity without end" (*infinita aeternitas*). Whilst the meaning of *temporalis aetas* is immediately clear, as it defines our experience of time, that of *infinita aeternitas* seems at first glance more difficult to explain. According to Tertullian, it stands for the period of salvation history that will begin after the end of the present world and will never end. In fact, the idea of "never-ending eternity" serves to deter-

[9] TERTULLIAN: *Apol.*, XLVIII, 11–12 (= CCSL 1, 167,69–168,82): Quae ratio universitatem ex diversitate composuit, ut omnia aemulis substantiis sub unitate constarent, ex uacuo et solido, ex animali et inanimali, ex comprehensibili et incomprehensibili, ex luce et tenebris, ex ipsa uita et morte, eadem aevum quoque ita distincta condicione conseruit, ut prima haec pars, ab exordio rerum quam incolimus, temporali aetate ad finem defluat, sequens uero, quam exspectamus, in infinitam aeternitatem propagetur. Cum ergo finis et limes, medius qui interhiat, affuerit, ut etiam ipsius mundi species transferatur aeque temporalis, quae illi dispositioni aeternitatis aulaei uice oppansa est, tunc restituetur omne hominum genus ad expungendum, quod in isto aeuo boni seu mali meruit, et exinde pendendum in immensam aeternitatis perpetuitatem. English translation by R. Arbesmann, in: *Tertullian Apologetical Works and Minucius Felix Octavius*. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1950, 120.

[10] Cfr. TERTULLIAN: *Apol.*, XXXIV, 1 (= CCSL 1, 144,5–6).

mine the duration mode of the everlasting beatitude, distinguishing it from both "our time" and God's eternity.

Although he does not always use consistent terminology, Tertullian is undoubtedly influenced by the Neoplatonic concern to maintain a clear line of demarcation between the eternal substance of the First Principle and the material-sensible world.[11] The concept *infinita aeternitas* serves to introduce a kind of "extended eternity" not to be confused with the "timelessness" of God.[12]

However, the fact that this distinction is used to explain the different stages of salvation history seems to be a peculiarity of Christian eschatology. The history of the universe evolves according to two successive stages: from the creation to the end of the present world, all created substances are subject to time; after the end of the present world, material realities will become corrupted and humans will experience an everlasting duration. Therefore, throughout universal history humans are subject to different duration modes, but they never experience the timeless eternity of God.

The keyword in Tertullian's argument is evidently *aevum*, as a kind of primordial time. As is well-known, in Greek literature and philosophy the significance of αἰών is rather equivocal.[13] Hence its transliteration, *aevum*, is not coherently employed in the first Latin literature.[14] In general, the concept covers the duration of all those periods of salvation history, not subject to temporality, but not assimilable to divine timelessness. *Aevum* embraces both the time of the present world and eternity without end, but with some differences. Whilst *temporalis aetas* represents a limited and

[11] On the Neoplatonic influence on Tertullian's thought see, among the others, MORESCHINI, C.: *Tertulliano tra stoicismo e platonismo*, in: RITTER, A.: (ed.): *Kerygma und Logos. Beiträge zu den geistesgeschichtlichen Beziehungen zwischen Antike und Christentum. Festschrift für Carl Andresen zum 70. Geburtstag*. Göttingen: Van den Hoeck & Ruprecht 1979, 367–379; HALLONSTEN, G.: *Tertullian and Platonism—Some Remarks*, in: PILTZ, A. (ed.:, *For Particular Reasons. Studies in Honour of Jerker Blomqvist*. Lund: Nordic Academic Press 2003, 113–128.

[12] The definition of "timelessness" is aimed to distinguish the atemporal divine eternity from an extended idea of eternity as everlasting time. Cfr. PIKE, H.: *God and Timelessness*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publisher 1970, 6–16; CRAIG, W.L.: *God, Time and Eternity. The Coherence of Theism II: Eternity*. Dodrecht: Springer 2001, 501–503.

[13] See, among the others, LACKEIT, C.: *Aion: Zeit und Ewigkeit in Sprache und Religion der Griechen*. Königsberg: Hartungsche 1916; BENVENISTE, E.: *Expression indo-européenne de l'Éternité*, in: Bulletin de la société linguistique de Paris 38 (1937), 103–112; PHILIPPSON, P.: *Il concetto greco di tempo nelle parole aion, chronos, kairos, eniautos*, in: Rivista di Storia della Filosofia 4 (1949), 81–97; STADTMÜLLER, G: *Aion*, in: Saeculum 2 (1951), 315–320; ONIANS, R.B.: *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time and Fate*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1951, 200–216; DEGANI, E.: *Aiôn da Omero ad Aristotele*. Padova: CEDAM 1961; PORRO, *Forme e modelli*, 55–57.

[14] Cfr. ERNOUT, A./MEILLET, A.: *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine. Histoire des mots*, 4e édition. Paris: Klincksieck 1959, 13–14; LUCIANI, S.: *D'αἰών à* aeternitas *: le transfert de la notion d'éternité chez Cicéron*, in: Ars Scribendi 4 (2006) (http://ars-scribendi.ens-lyon.fr/).

"fallen" kind of *aevum, infinita aeternitas* constitutes its most complete and final expression. Occurrences of the term in other Tertullian's works seem to confirm this reading. For example, in the *Adversus Marcionem* the future everlasting life is described by expressions such as *vivere in aevum* or *manere in aevum*,[15] while in the *Adversus Hermogenen* the timeless eternity of God is distinguished from an "indefinite everlastingness" by the suggestive syntagma *aevum aevorum*.[16]

The concept of *aevum* thus plays a crucial role to introduce a sort of "diminished" eternity,[17] corresponding to duration mode of the future everlasting life. This interpretation is taken up and evolves in the Patristic writings, going to affect the use of other ambiguous terms or expressions: for example, the biblical syntagma *aeterna tempora*.

2.2. *The exegesis of aeterna tempora*

In the quotation from the *Apologeticum*, *aevum* stands for the first created duration (*conseruit aevum*). However, Tertullian does not explore the original meaning of such "primordial time", as he immediately presents it in its "fallen" expression (*temporalis aetas*). In fact, defining the duration of what occurred before "our time" is as crucial as to establish the duration of the future everlasting life. Both questions equally underlie the need to think alternative duration modes to our time, in order to define all stages of salvation history.

The effort to establish the nature of "a time in general sense", existing before the present world, is frequently due to the difficult exegesis of two controverse passages of the Pauline epistles.[18] In the *Epistula II ad Timotheum* the Apostle says: "The grace bestowed on us in Christ Jesus before time began,"[19] and in the *Epistula ad Titum* he restates his idea, by saying that God promises us the eternal life "before time began."[20] The modern translations are problematic and do not reflect the ambiguity of the original Greek expression. In fact, the Greek text, προ χρόνων αἰωνίων, matches two contrasting notions: whilst the noun χρόνος is generally translated in Latin with *tempus*, the adjective αἰώνιος, deriving from the noun αἰών

[15] TERTULLIAN: *Adv. Marc.*, II; IV (= CCSL 1, 504,29; 634,18).

[16] TERTULLIAN: *Adversus Hermog.*, III, 2 (= CCSL 1, 398,26).

[17] This expression has large fortune in the Scholastic vocabulary. However, it never defines the duration of a particular period of salvation history, but rather the durational condition of angels and rational souls. Cfr. STEEL, C.: *The Neoplatonic Doctrine of Time and Eternity and its Influence on Medieval Philosophy*, in: PORRO, P. (ed.): *The medieval concept of time*, 3–31, here 18.

[18] A considerable number of studies have been written on the attribution of Paul's letters. As not an essential issue for the purpose of our study, it is not intended to be addressed here.

[19] II Tim. 1,9.

[20] Tit. 1,2.

(*aevum*), is rendered with *aeviterna* or, more frequently, with *aeterna*. The syntagma is therefore transliterated as *ante tempora aeterna* or *ante aeterna tempora*. The risk of confusing this particular duration with God's is obviously high.

The process of diffusion of the so-called *Veteres Latinae* is difficult to reconstruct, as late ancient commentators usually provide for themselves to translate excerpts or brief quotations from the Greek text of the Holy Scripture.[21] Hence, it is impossible to identify the first use of the expression *ante tempora aeterna* in the Christian Latin literature. There is no trace of it in Tertullian's writings, and the reference to "an eternal time" (*tempus aeternum*) in Lactantius' *Divinae Institutiones*, is related to a lost apocryphal passage of the *Book of Ezra*, presumably quoted on the basis of Justin's *Apologia*. The scribe Ezra encourages the people of Israel with the promise that God will not abandon them "for an eternal time."[22]

On the contrary, comments on *aeterna tempora* can be found in Hilary of Poitiers' *De trinitate*. The author does not directly focus on the ambiguous expression, but rather he attempts to clarify the differences between the eternal duration before the creation of the present world and the eternity of the Trinity. This is evidently due to the need of contrasting Arian theses concerning a possible chronological succession between Father and Son:

> "For we can embrace all time in imagination or knowledge, as we know that what is now today, did not exist yesterday, because what was yesterday is not now; and on the other hand what is now, is only now and was not also yesterday. And by imagination we can so span the past that we have no doubt that before some city was founded, there existed a time in which that city had not been founded. Since, therefore, all time is the sphere of knowledge or imagination, we judge of it by the perceptions of human reason; hence we are considered to have reasonably asserted about anything, it was not, before it was born, since antecedent time is prior to the origin of every single thing. But on the other hand, since in things of God, that is to say, in regard to the birth of God, there is nothing that is not before time eternal: it is illogical to use of Him the phrase before He was born, or to suppose that He Who possesses before times eternal the eternal promise, is merely (in the language of the bles-

[21] HOUGHTON, H.A.G.: *Scripture and Latin Christian Manuscripts from North Africa*, in: YATES, J./DUPONT, A. (eds.): *The Bible in Christian North Africa: Part I: Commencement to the Confessiones of Augustine (ca. 180 to 400 CE)*. Berlin: De Gruyter 2020, 15–50.

[22] Cfr. LACTANTIUS: *Inst.*, IV, 18 (= CSEL 19, 355,8–356,3): cogitate et ascendat in cor vestrum, quoniam habemus humiliare eum in signo: et post haec sperabimus in eum, ne deseratur hic locus in aeternum tempus, dicit dominus deus virtutum. Cfr. IUSTINI MARTYRIS: *Dialogus cum Tryphone*, 72.1, ed. M. Marcovich. Berlin: De Gruyter 1997, 194, ll. 1–8; Cfr. RESCH, A.: *Agrapha. Außercanonische Schriftfragmente*, 16. Leipzig: Hinrichs' Buchhandlung 1906, 304–305; COLLINS, A.Y.: *The Uses of Apocalyptic Eschatology*, in: HENZE, M./BOCCACCINI, G.: *Fourth Ezra and Second Baruch. Reconstruction after the Fall*. Leiden: Brill 2013, 253–270; EDWARDS, M.: *Scripture in the North African Apologists Arnobius and Lactantius*, in: YATES/DUPONT (eds.): *The Bible in Christian North Africa*, 168–188.

> sed Apostle) in hope of eternal life, which God Who cannot lie has promised before times eternal, or to say that once He was not. For reason rejects the notion that He began to exist after anything, Who, so we must confess, existed before times eternal."[23]

The use of terms such as "before" or "after" makes no sense in the case of the Trinitarian essence, as unique and timeless.[24] God's eternity is to be considered as a atemporal condition and should be distinguished from *aeterna tempora*, which are rather to be regarded as a primordial form of duration.

What happened in the early stage of the history of the universe is unclear, but there are good reasons to compare this period, designated by the expression *aeterna tempora*, with Tertullian's *aevum*: both notions typify an intermediate duration between "eternity" and "time". These concepts are not primarily employed to describe the condition of particular entities (angels, rational souls, celestial bodies), but rather to measure two periods of salvation history, before and after "our time".

The problem of *aeterna tempora* is discussed also by Augustine of Hippo on several occasions.[25] In the *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, he basically follows Hilary of Poitiers' position:

> "[...] we do not say that this world has the same duration as God, for this world does not have the same eternity as the eternity that God has. God certainly made the world, and thus time began to be along with the creation that God made, and in this sense time is called eternal. Nonetheless, time is not eternal in the same way that God is eternal, because God who is the maker of time is before time."[26]

[23] HILARY OF POITIERS: *Trin.*, XII, 27 (= CCSL 62A, 660,1–601,19): Tempora enim omnia uel opinione conplectimur uel scientia: cum quod nunc est scimus non etiam pridie fuisse, quia quod pridie fuerit nunc non sit, quod autem nunc est nunc tantum sit, non et pridie fuerit. Opinione uero ita praeterita metimur, ut ante urbem aliquam institutam non ambigatur tempus fuisse quo urbs instituta non fuerit. Cum ergo uel scientiae uel opinioni nostrae subiacent tempora, sensu humanae intellegentiae iudicamus, ut de aliqua re ratione dixisse existimemur: "Non fuit antequam nascitur", quia uniuscuiusque originem tempora semper antelata praeueniant. Aduero cum in Dei rebus, id est in Dei natiuitate, nihil non ante tempus aeternum sit, non cadit in id, ut antequam natus est, cuique ante tempora aeterna promissum aeternum sit, secundum beati apostoli dictum: in spe uitae aeternae, quam promisit non mendax Deus ante tempora aeterna, aliquando non fuisse dicatur: quia intellegi non potest coepisse post aliquid qui esse sit ante aeterna tempora confitendus. English translation by P. Schaff, in: *Hilary of Poitiers, John of Damascus*. Ontario, Canada: Ingersoll 2019, 461.

[24] Cfr. also HILARY OF POITIERS: *Comm. in Matth.*, 31 (= SC 258, 226,18–19): Deus autem sine mensura temporum semper est et qualis est, talis aeternus est.

[25] A comprehensive analysis of the Augustinian understanding of the Pauline expression *ante aeterna tempora* can be found in CATAPANO, G.: *L'interpretazione agostiniana dei "tempi eterni" e il concetto di* aevum, in: *Tempo di Dio, tempo dell'uomo: XLVI Incontro di studiosi dell'antichità cristiana (Roma, 10–12 maggio 2018)*. Roma: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum 2019, 27–40, in particular, 27–36.

[26] AUGUSTINUS: *Gen. adv. Man.*, I, 2.4 (= CSEL 91, 70,3–9): [...] non enim coaeuum deo mundum istum dicimus, quia non eius aeternitatis est hic mundus, cuius aeternitatis est

The same reasoning is adopted in a question of *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus*, explicitly devoted to explore the meaning of the ambiguous Pauline expression. Augustine wonders "if times, how are they eternal?".[27] Two are the possible solutions:

> "[...] if he had said, 'before the times', and not added the adjective eternal, we could understand, 'before certain times which were preceded by other times'. But he preferred to use the word eternal rather than all for possibly this reason, that time does not begin from time. Or did the eternal times signify the aevum, the difference between the latter and time being this: the aevum is unchangeable, whereas time is subject to change?"[28]

He does not explicitly take a position in favor of either hypothesis, as his main concern seems to be another: like in the quotation from *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, Augustine reiterates that *aeterna tempora* does not coincide with the timeless condition of God. Echoing the Neoplatonic approach on the dialectic eternity-time,[29] he intends in every way to distinguish the divine eternity from any other possible form of perpetuity. Using a terminology that will later become clearer, *aeterna tempora* are thus to be considered as more similar to a sort of "omnitemporal" eternity rather than a true "atemporality".

A brief survey on the Augustinian use of the notion *aevum* seems to substantiate this reading. Despite not having a specialized vocabulary of durations, Augustine's purpose is to establish a duration mode for all those stages of salvation history, which are not measurable by "our time" and likewise not corresponding with the divine eternity. In that sense the no-

deus: mundum quippe fecit deus, et sic cum ipsa creatura quam deus fecit, tempora esse coeperunt; et ideo dicuntur tempora aeterna. Non tamen sic sunt aeterna tempora quomodo aeternus est deus, quia deus est ante tempora, qui fabricator est temporum [...]. English translation is mine.

[27] AUGUSTINUS: *div. qu.*, 72 (= CCSL 44A, 208,2): Si enim tempora, quomodo aeterna? uel si aeterna, quomodo tempora?. English translation: SAINT AUGUSTINE: *Eighty-three different questions*, transl. by D.L. Mosher. Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press 2002, 185.

[28] AUGUSTINUS: *div. qu.*, 72 (= CCSL 44A, 208,5–10): [...] si dixisset ante tempora neque addidisset aeterna, posset accipi ante quaedam tempora, quae ante se haberent alia tempora. Aeterna autem maluit dicere quam omnia fortasse ideo, quia tempus non coepit ex tempore. An aeterna tempora aeuum significauit, inter quod et tempus hoc distat, quod illud stabile est, tempus autem mutabile. English translation: 185.

[29] For an updated and comprehensive analysis on the combination of eternity and time in Neoplatonic thought, see CHIARADONNA, R.: *Eternity and Time*, in: GERSON, L.P./WILBERDING, J. (eds.): *The New Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2022, 267–288. About the influence on the Augustinian reflection see, among the others, GUITTON, J.: *Temps et l'éternité chez Plotin et saint Augustin*. Paris: Vrin 2004; FLASCH, K.: *Was ist Zeit? Augustinus von Hippo. Das XI. Buch der Confessiones. Historisch-philosophische Studie. Text – Übersetzung – Kommentar*. Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann 1993, 130–149; BEIERWALTES, W.: *Agostino e il Neoplatonismo cristiano*. Milano: Vita e Pensiero 1995, 121–142.

tions *aevum* or *aeterna tempora*, completely interchangeable, works to this purpose.

The same problem recurs in *De trinitate* and *De civitate Dei*,[30] but Augustine's final opinion is presumably to be found in the treatise *Contra Priscillianistas et Origenistas*. Here he explicitly quotes the Greek text of Paul's epistles:

> "The apostle called prior times in the distant past eternal; in Greek it says: προ χρόνων αἰωνίων. When writing to Titus he says, 'The hope of eternal life which God who cannot lie promised before eternal times'. Since, however, we see that previous times had a beginning with the creation of the world, how can they be eternal, unless he called eternal those times which have no time before them?"[31]

Augustine merely elaborates on what he had written in *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus*: the adjective "eternal", however misused, serves to define "times not chronologically preceded". Paul's purpose, therefore, is to distinguish *aeterna tempora* from "our time". Then, identifying the "eternal times" with the concept of *aevum*—as suggested by the second hypothesis of *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus*—does not entail any change in this conclusion, but rather underscores a line of continuity in Patristic reflection on this theme. Hilary and Augustine, as well as Tertullian, refer to the Neoplatonic paradigm to mark the difference between the duration mode of Creator and that of creatures. However, their concern seems not only metaphysical, but also "historical". They intend to explain certain aspects characterizing the different stages of salvation history, and for this purpose, they combine all available notions or terms, deriving from Greek literature or biblical tradition.

Beyond simple lexical choices, the fact that the time of the present world does not represent the unique created duration is a very recurring theme in the Augustinian work. This is closely related to understanding of the biblical account of creation. For example, in the eleventh book of *De civitate Dei* Augustine interprets the expression "evening came, and morning followed"—which marks the first six days of creation—as a convincing demonstration that the Christian eschatology implies a kind of time not subject to any human measure:

[30] AUGUSTINUS: *Trin.*, V, 16.17 (= CCSL 50, 225,9–226,37); ID.: *Civ.*, XII, 17 (= CCSL 48, 373,1–16).

[31] AUGUSTINUS: *C. Prisc.*, V, 6 (= CCSL 49, 170,143–149): Dixit apostolus tempora aeterna priora et antiqua, quod in graeco legitur: Πρὸ χρόνων αἰωνίων. Ad titum enim scribens ait: spem uitae aeternae quam promisit non mendax deus ante tempora aeterna. Cum autem retrorsum tempora a constitutione mundi habere uideantur initium, quomodo sunt aeterna, nisi quia aeterna dixit, quae ante se non habent ullum tempus?. English translation: *Arianism and Other Heresies*, transl. by R.J. Teske. New York: New City Press 1995, 107.

> "The fact is that the world was made simultaneously with time, if, with creation, motion and change began. Now this seems evident from the order of the first six or seven days. For, the morning and evening of each of these days are counted until on the sixth day all that had been created during this time was complete. Then, on the seventh day, in a mysterious revelation, we are told that God ceased from work. As for these 'days', it is difficult, perhaps impossible to think—let alone to explain in words—what they mean."[32]

Although the succession of "evening" and "morning" seems to imply a change, and consequently a "temporal flow", this particular form of "becoming" cannot consist in a chronological sequence of past, present, and future, as factors in the human perception of time. Therefore, this temporal flow is to be understood as another kind of time.[33]

These last remarks reflect the strong interest of the proto-Christian thought for explaining the succession of different durations in salvation history. The key issue does not seem to be the classification of the duration modes in itself, but rather the description of their emergence and evolution within an historical process.

A brief interlude on Marius Victorinus' *Explanationes in Ciceronis Rhetoricam* further corroborates this interpretation, leading us to add another important piece to our research.

3. Marius Victorinus and the concept of *tempus generale*

Marius Victorinus' *Explanationes in Ciceronis Rhetoricam* is a commentary on Cicero's *De inventione* written before both Hilary of Poitiers' *De trinitate* and Augustine's works.[34] Consequently, the analysis of this text should have been conducted earlier. The decision to consider it later is due to the particular nature of the work: the *Explanationes* are clearly not a theological treatise and were written before Victorinus' conversion to Christianity. Moreover, both Cicero's *De inventione* and Victorinus' commentary do not focus on the concept of "time" in philosophical or theological terms,

[32] Augustinus: *civ.*, XI, 6 (= CCSL 48, 326,20–27): Cum tempore autem factus est mundus, si in eius conditione factus est mutabilis motus, sicut videtur se habere etiam ordo ille primorum sex vel septem dierum, in quibus et mane et vespera nominantur, donec omnia, quae his diebus Deus fecit, sexto perficiantur die septimoque in magno mysterio Dei vacatio commendetur. Qui dies cuius modi sint, aut perdifficile nobis, aut etiam impossibile est cogitare, quanto magis dicere. English translation: Saint Augustine: *The City of God. Books VIII-XVI*, transl. by G.G. Walsh, G. Monahan. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press 2008, 196.

[33] Cfr. Guitton, J.: *Temps et l'éternité chez Plotin et saint Augustin*. Paris: Vrin 2004, in particular, 192–222.

[34] About the dating of the text, see Ippolito, A.: *Per una storia del testo di Mario Vittorino retore dall'Antichità al secolo XVI*, in: Marius Victorinus: *Explanationes in Ciceronis Rhetoricam* (= CCSL 132, XI–XXIV, in particular, XI–XX).

but rather they explore its function in the rhetorical art.[35] Nevertheless, two aspects of Victorinus' argument deserve consideration for our study: (a) the understanding of the relationship between eternity and time, and (b) the use of the expression *tempus generale* for translating the Greek term *aevum*:

> "It is generally difficult to define time, as it is necessary that time has always existed. This means that it has existed before or with the present world: many people argue that the present world was created, while other do not. Then, this 'general time', without beginning and end, is the eternity, that the Greeks call 'aevum'. However, as it is difficult to define this time, Cicero provides a definition, by considering how we usually use this concept. 'The time is' he said 'a certain portion of eternity with some fixed limitation of annual or monthly, or daily or nightly space'. In fact, a precise definition of certain time was provided from the movement of the stars."[36]

(a) Victorinus considers eternity and time as two duration modes of the same nature, but of different length: time is defined as "a portion of eternity" (*pars aeternitatis*). Needless to say, Victorinus is not referring here to a "timeless eternity", but rather to an extended duration, preceding any division into years, months, and days, and of which our time constitutes only a part. This conception of eternity, even in its formulation, evokes the Greek idea ὁ πᾶς χρόνος, used by the Stoic philosopher Ario Didymus.[37] In terms of our analysis, however, the concept of "general time" seems to perfectly match with notions such as *aeterna tempora* or *aevum*, traceable in the Patristic writings.

(b) The fact that Victorinus relates the notion of "general time" to the Greek term *aeona* confirms what has been said earlier about *aevum* or *aeterna tempora* as a "lower degree" of eternity, to be distinguished from God's du-

[35] Cfr. GAVOILLE, É.: *Sens et définition chez Cicéron*, in: *Lingua Latina. Conceptions latines du sens et de la définition*. Paris: PUPS 1999, 81–95.

[36] MARIUS VICTORINUS: *Explanationes in Ciceronis Rhetoricam*, 1, 26 (= CCSL 132, 121,160–170): Tempus generaliter definire difficile est, quod tempus semper fuerit necesse est sive ante mundum siue cum mundo; multi enim natum mundum, multi natum non esse contendunt. Ergo hoc tempus generale, quia nec initium nec finem habet, aeternitas est, quam Graeci aeona appellant. Verum quoniam hoc tempus definire difficile est, illud definit quo nunc utimur: tempus est, inquit, pars quaedam aeternitatis, aut annuum aut diurnum aut nocturnum spatium significans; ex cursu enim siderum certis temporibus certum nomen impositum est.

[37] Cfr. STOBEO: I, 8, 42 (=Ario Didimo, DG, fr. 26, 461). Cfr. GOLDSCHMIDT, V.: *Le systeme stoïcien et l'idée de temps*. Paris: Vrin 1953, 186ss; SALLES, R.: *Two Classic Problems in the Stoic Theory of Time*, in: Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy 55 (2018), 133–184; KARFÍKOVÁ, L.: *Time According to Marius Victorinus, Adversus Arium IV 15*, in: Studia patristica 46 (2010), 119–124.

ration mode.[38] The classical vocabulary of time, clarified in the *Explanationes*, thus provides Christian thinkers with the conceptual material to address and discuss the problem of different forms of eternity (timelessness or general time). This is a lexicon assimilated mainly from the Neoplatonic tradition, which—as has already pointed out - does not, however, seem to explain the succession of different duration modes. After all, for obvious reasons, in the *Explanationes* there is no evidence of a "dynamic" use of the concepts of time, *aevum* (*tempus generale*), and eternity: they are presented as different duration modes without any concern for their historical interaction. On the contrary, a usage of the duration vocabulary to distinguish various phases of world history may be found in Victorinus' theological writings. The term αἰών carries two opposite meanings: it denotes the initial work (*opus*) of the divine life and equally is to be intended as a divine name, like "life" or "good".[39] This means that the same concept serves to characterize both the creatures and the creator. Whilst the former meaning can be related with the idea of *tempus generale* as primordial duration, the latter retrieves a theological motif of the Neoplatonic philosophy.[40] Because the reasons underlying this ambiguity approach are set out elsewhere,[41] here suffice it to note that, the possibility to interpret the concept of *aevum* as a first emanation from God is in keeping with the considerations above: the need to develop new concepts for describing different duration modes is not simply the legacy, though decisive, of the Neoplatonic tradition, but also reflects the attempt to name the duration of all phases of salvation history.

4. Conclusion: a fortune without heir?

Two different reasons are behind the need for new duration modes alongside "eternity" and "time". Firstly, early Christian authors are concerned to distinguish the duration of God from that of everything derived from Him. This means that any created realities, not subject to time, could still not be measured by divine non-extended eternity. This conception is clearly not a

[38] Moreover, in the medieval discussions the expression *tempus generale*, frequently combined with the concept of *aevum*, seems to have its roots exactly in these few lines of Victorinus' *Explanationes*. Cfr. note 6.

[39] Marius Victorinus: *Adv. Arium*, IV, 15 (= CSEL 83.1, 247,9–10,20-21,23-26). Cfr. Plotinus: *Enn.* III 7.3.16–17.

[40] Cfr. Benz, E.: *Marius Victorinus und die Entwicklung der abendländischen Willensmetaphysik*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1932, 103–106; Hadot, P.: *Porphyre et Victorinus, I*. Paris: Études Augustiniennes 1968, in particular, 45–78; Baltes, M.: *Marius Victorinus: zur Philosophie in seinen theologischen Schriften*. München: K.G. Saur 2002, 117–125; Bradshaw, D.: *Aristotle East and West. Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004, 97–118.

[41] On this topic, see Karfíková, L: *Time According to Marius Victorinus, Adversus Arium IV 15*, 119–124.

distinguishing feature of the early Christian thought, but it explicitly echoes Neoplatonic ideas about the essence of the First principle. Secondly, Tertullian, Hilary of Poitiers, Marius Victorinus, and Augustine must clearly define the different duration modes that characterized (and will characterize) the various periods of salvation history. Thus their purpose is not simply to provide a static catalog of durations, but to follow their evolution from creation to the end of time. This aspect seems to represent a distinctive trait of early Christian reflection.

After the initial effort of Latin Fathers of the Church for an historical (or dynamic) reading of the duration modes, this approach however seems to be mostly neglected by the medieval writings on this matter. Severinus Boethius presumably marks a watershed in this regard.

Because detailed investigations on the Boethian view of time and eternity are available elsewhere,[42] suffice it to say that whenever he is classifying and categorizing the duration modes, he never makes references to the different stages of salvation history. For example, in the second edition of his commentary on Aristotle's *Peri ermeneias* he distinguishes "sempiternity", as duration of celestial bodies, from "eternity" peculiar of God alone.[43] Nevertheless, he does not raise the problem of the origin and the end of the universe. Similarly, in *De trinitate* the distinction between eternal instant (*nunc permanens*) and flowing instant (*nunc currens* or *fluens*),[44] is presented as a mere physical consideration without any reference to the possible historical interactions between eternity, sempiternity, and temporality. Finally, the well-known definition of "eternity" as *interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio*,[45] is essentially to be read as solution to the apparent incompatibility between human free will and divine omniscience.[46] However, Boethius does not provide examples of historical events attesting to the communication between eternity and temporality, such as creation, incarnation, or universal resurrection.

It is very difficult to know for sure precisely why Boethius' silence on the historical evolution of the different duration modes. Although it is

[42] See, among the others, OBERTELLO, L: *Severino Boezio*. Genova: Accademia Ligure di Scienze e Lettere 1974, in particular, 673–699; STUMP, E./KRETZMANN, N.: *Eternity*, in: The Journal of Philosophy 78 (1981), 430–458; FITZGERALD, P.: *Stump and Kretzmann on Time and Eternity*, in: The Journal of Philosophy 82 (1985), 260–269; STUMP/KRETZMANN: *Atemporal Duration*, in: The Journal of Philosophy 84 (1987), pp. 214–219; LEFTOW, B.: *Boethius on Eternity*, in: History of Philosophy Quarterly 7 (1990), 123–142; D'ONOFRIO, G.: *Boezio e l'essenza del tempo*, in: RUGGIU (a cura di): *Il tempo in questione*, 119–129.

[43] BOETHIUS: *Comm. in Aristotelis Perì hermeneias (editio secunda)*, V, c. 12, ed. C. Meiser. Lipsia: B.G. Teubneri 1880, 412,3–8.

[44] BOETHIUS: *trin.*, 4 (= LCL 74, 20,64–22,74). On the use of *fluens* instead of *currens*, see THOMAS AQUINAS: *S.th.*, I, q. 10, art. 2, arg. 1.

[45] BOETHIUS: *cons.*, V, 6.4 (= CCSL 94, 101,8–9).

[46] Cfr. COURCELLE, P.: *La consolation de la philosophie dans la tradition littéraire*. Paris: Études Augustiniennes 1967, 214.

inappropriate to dissolve Boethius' identity in speculation about his sources,[47] it is a fact that his works are profoundly influenced by a wide variety of philosophical sources alien to any kind of theology of history. In other words, the absence of a genesis of the notions "eternity", "sempiternity", and "time" in the Boethian writings could be due to a philosophical framework not comprising a reflection on the history of the world. In particular, unlike earlier Patristic literature, Aristotle's theory of ten predicaments or categories seems to significantly affect Boethius' way of proceeding. A logical argumentation seems to be much better suited to a static representation of duration modes than to a dynamic description of their origin, evolution, and end.[48]

In any case, from Boethius onward the classification of the durations becomes a physical, or rather metaphysical affair: what is at issue is not the "historical evolution" of the universe (from the creation to the end of time or the universal resurrection), but rather an hypothetical inventory of all forms of duration of the universe, including both bodily and spiritual creatures. Several 13th-century writings on the subject attest this transformation. For example, Albert the Great's focus is not on the origin of concepts, but rather on the systematical analysis of three key notions (*aeternitas, aevum,* and *tempus*), in order to establish the duration of all substances of the universe.[49] Aquinas' approach deviates only slightly from this interpretation.[50] Then, a general overview of a number of late medieval treatises closely devoted to this issue, such as *De mensura angelorum* by Giles of Rome or *De mensuris* by Dietrich of Freiberg, shows the final consecration of a metaphysical reading of the problem of the duration.[51]

[47] Cfr. MARENBON, J.: *Introduction: reading Boethius whole*, in: MARENBON, J. (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Boethius*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009, 1–10, here 5.

[48] Cfr. BARNES, J.: *Boethius and the study of logic*, in: GIBSON, M.T. (ed.): *Boethius. His Life, Thought and Influence*. Oxford: Blackwell Publisher 1981, 73–89; MARTIN, J.C.: *The logical textbooks and their influence*, in: MARENBON: *The Cambridge Companion to Boethius*, 56–84.

[49] The most systematical analysis on this matter presumably can be found in ALBERT THE GREAT: *Summa de creaturis. De IV coaequaevis*, II, 3–6, ed. A. Borgnet. Parisiis: Vivès 1895, 338–394. For a broad overview on Albert the Great's reflection on time and duration, see ANZULEWICZ: *Aeternitas, Aevum, Tempus: The Concept of Time in the System of Albert the Great*, in: PORRO: *The Medieval Concept of Time*, 83–129.

[50] See, for example, THOMAS AQUINAS: *Super Sent.*, I, 19, q. 2, art. 1, 465–469. Among the critical studies devoted to Aquinas' concepts of time and durations, see GHISALBERTI, A.: *La nozione di tempo in S. Tommaso d'Aquino*, in: Rivista di Filosofia Neoscolastica 59 (1967), 343–371; SHANLEY, B.J.: *Eternity and duration in Aquinas*, in: Thomist 61 (1997), 525–548.

[51] On Dietrich of Freiberg's view of time see, among the others, REHN: *Quomodo tempus sit? Zur Frage nach dem Sein der Zeit bei Aristoteles und Dietrich von Freiberg*, in: FLASCH (ed.): *Von Meister Dietrich zu Meister Eckhart*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner 1984, 1–11; LARGIER, N.: *Zeit, Zeitlichkeit, Ewigkeit. Ein Aufriss des Zeitproblems bei Dietrich von Freiberg und Meister Eckhart*. Bern: Lang 1989, in particular, 252–260; COLLI, A.: *Tracce agostiniane nell'opera di Teodorico di Freiberg*. Milano: Marietti 2010, in particular, 138–178. On Giles of Rome, see PORRO: *"Ex adiacentia temporis": Egidio Romano e la categoria "quando"*, in: Documenti e

There are some exceptions. For example, John Scotus Eriugena introduces his conception of time, taking into account the evolution of the different natures forming his worldview.[52] In fact, the notion of *tempus generale*, borrowed from the terminology of Marius Victorinus, emerges from this reflection. Then, Honorius of Autun devotes the second book of his *Imago mundi* to the time of the world (*sequenti iam tempus in quo volvitur oculis cordis anteponamus*).[53] He examines all different portions of time (*athomus, ostentum, momentum, pars, minutum, punctus, hora, quadrante, die*),[54] after a broad overview on the genesis of the concepts of *aevum, tempora aeterna*, and *tempus*:

> "1) Aevum: aevum is before the world, with the world and after the world. This is only proper to God, that did not exist and will not exist, but he always exist. 2) The eternal times are subjected to aevum. They belong to the 'archetypical world' and to the angelic creatures. They came into existence before the world, exist with the world and will exist after the world. 3) Time. Time of the world is a shadow of aevum. Time begins with the world and ends with it [...]."[55]

Although concise and not completely corresponding to the Patristic view, these observations present the different durations modes considering their genesis and evolution.

In the 13th century, alternatives to the prevalent static interpretation of the problem of durations become even more rare. There are some noteworthy cases in the Franciscan school: an exegesis of the Pauline expression *aeterna tempora* can be found, for example, in Alexander of Hales' *Summa theologica*,[56] while in the *Commentaria in secundum librum Sententiarum* Bonaventure addresses the problem of *aevum*, in terms similar to those used by the Fathers of the Church.[57] However, although the historical perspective is undoubtedly more relevant in Franciscan milieu than in

studi sulla tradizione filosofica medievale 2 (1991), 147–181; ID.: *Angelic Measure and Discrete Time*, in: ID.: *The Medieval Concept of Time*, 131–159.

52 Cfr. CRISTIANI, M.: *Lo spazio e il tempo nell'opera dell'Eriugena*, in: St. Med. 14 (1973), 39–136; ID.: *Le problème du lieu et du temps dans le livre Ier du "Peryphyseon"*, in: O'MEARA, J.J./BIELER L. (eds.): *The Mind of Eriugena*. Dublin: Irish University Press 1973, 41–48.

53 HONORIUS OF AUTUN: *Imago mundi*, II, ed. V.I.J. Flint, in: AHDL 49 (1982), 92.

54 HONORIUS OF AUTUN: *Imago mundi*, II, 4–12, 93–94.

55 HONORIUS OF AUTUN: *Imago mundi*, II, 1–2, 92: 1. Evum. Evum est ante mundum, cum mundo, post mundum. Hoc ad solum Deum pertinet, qui non fuit, nec erit, sed semper est. 2. Tempora ęterna. Tempora ęterna sub ęvo sunt, et hęc ad archetipum mundum et angelos pertinent, qui ante mundum esse cęperunt, et cum mundo sunt, et post mundo erunt. English translation is mine.

56 Cfr. ALEXANDER OF HALES: *S. th.*, I, pars 1, inq. 1, tr. 2, q. 4, membrum 1, cap. 1, art. 2, 86.

57 See, for example, BONAVENTURE: *Super Sent.*, II, art. 2, q. 1. Florence: Quaracchi 1885, 64–65.

other contexts, the categories and terminology of the Peripatetic tradition play a leading role also in these writings.[58]

Is the growing influence of the Aristotelian scientific model the only reason for the disparity between the emergence and the evolution of the problem of the durations? Perhaps this accelerates the transformation process. However, underlying this are also two different speculative interests: in the first Patristic studies the need to explain some crucial events in salvation history, in later medieval discussions to match the Christian worldview with the Aristotelian scientific vocabulary. Indeed, the Patristic literature regards historical discourse and classification of durations as two sides of the same problem. On the contrary, in the medieval reflections the first aspect presumably survives in a few isolated cases of "theology of history", while the second aspect flows into many and detailed studies on time and duration. Tertullian, Hilary of Poitiers, Marius Victorinus, Augustine, and other Proto-Christian authors principally have the responsibility to assess incongruences, emerging from the interpretation of the Holy Scripture. Medieval theologians, such as Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, or Dietrich of Freiberg are not essentially concerned with this aspect, as the exegetical work conducted in previous centuries offers them reasonable conclusions. Instead, they are engaged in the difficult challenge of applying terms such as *aevum, aeternitas, sempiternitas, aeviternitas, tempora aeterna*, to a rigorous scientific analysis.

In conclusion, the metamorphosis of the problem is due to a change in interests and is certainly facilitated by the increasing assimilation of a philosophical paradigm, the Peripatetic model, lacking a comprehensive view of concepts such as "beginning", "end", and, above all, "history". However, one problem remains open: are the above exceptions really isolated cases? Is the historical or dynamic approach to the classification of durations ignored over the centuries? The present study aimed to do justice to the originality and richness of the first analysis on the durations. Focusing on the genesis of the problem, further research needs to be conducted to explore alternatives to the mainstream. There is a real possibility of charting new avenues of research and giving more precise contours to the medieval debate on durations.

[58] Cfr. BIGI, V.C.: *Tempo e temporalità in san Bonaventura*, in: Doctor Seraphicus 39 (1992), 65–73; RODOLFI, A.: *Tempo e creazione nel pensiero di Bonaventura da Bagnoregio*, in: St. Med. 37 (1996), 135–169.

Abstract
Medieval thinkers are often seen as "accountants" engaged in a classification of all substances forming the world with their modes of duration. This image, corresponding to the approach of some 13th-century theologians, does not reflect the origin of the problem. In the Patristic tradition the existence of durations beyond eternity and time is not related to an inventory of the world, but rather aimed at explaining the sequence of different stages in salvation history (from the creation to the end times). The present study considers some examples of the Patristic approach to the problem of duration, exploring sources and possible links with later medieval reflection on the matter.